

Introduction

The correspondence between John Cage (b. September 5, 1912, Los Angeles, CA; d. August 12, 1992, New York, NY) and Peter Yates (b. November 30, 1909, Toronto, Canada; d. February 26, 1976, Buffalo, NY) represents the final part of Cage's three most significant exchanges of letters across his life and, unlike the other two sequences – between Cage and the composer Pierre Boulez and Cage and the pianist David Tudor – that with Yates covers a very broad temporal span, most of Yates's working life, beginning in 1940 and continuing until 1971. It is, in no small part as a result of this long time period, more substantial than these others: it totals well over 100 individual items. Moreover, Yates knew Cage as a younger man, before, in a sense, he had yet become Cage. Indeed, though Thomas Hines rightly argues that elements of a quite familiar Cage can already be seen in his Los Angeles years, up until 1938, in several quite noteworthy senses it is through the correspondence with Yates that Cage *does* become Cage.¹ It is significant, too, that Yates knew Cage first as, if not an Angeleno, at least a Californian. As is implied in Laura Kuhn's preface to her recently published selection of Cage's letters, as well as representing the last of Cage's three most important formative exchanges, it is also one of a different nature from the other two: "By his late thirties, Cage is writing with ease and fluency to his intellectual peers: Pierre Boulez and David Tudor, especially, on technical matters of composition and performance, and Peter Yates, on matters of aesthetics, music history, and style."² Indeed, it is not entirely unreasonable to suggest that in Cage's famous tricolon, "composing's one thing, performing's another, listening's a third," the correspondence with Yates represents precisely, in engaging alignment with Cage's fastidious neatness, the part of his letter writing in which he engages most directly with the last part of that triad of musical elements. Moreover, Yates truly was Cage's contemporary, a little shy of three years older than him, even if the age gap – Cage so often seeming

¹ See Thomas S. Hines, 'Then Not Yet "Cage": The Los Angeles Years, 1912–1938,' in Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (eds.), *John Cage: Composed in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 65–99.

² Laura Kuhn (ed.), *The Selected Letters of John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), xvii.

younger than he actually was – often feels rather wider. Those two other major correspondents were more than a decade younger than Cage.

Yates himself was an intriguing figure: perhaps remembered most now for reporting, in a letter to Cage of August 8, 1953,³ Schoenberg's remark that Cage was, if not a composer, instead an inventor of genius, he was also the founder, in 1939, of the Evenings on the Roof concerts in Los Angeles, at first held in the Rudolph Schindler-designed concert hall extension to his Micheltorena Street home in (then bohemian) Silver Lake, which would host many important US and West Coast premieres of music by, inter alia, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Boulez, and Cage, as well as the author of a long-standing music column for *Arts & Architecture* magazine, all the while working for the California Department of Employment, on the reverse of whose time sheets many of his essays were drafted. The centrality of the amateur musician was something of an article of faith for Yates, as captured in the title of his first book, *An Amateur at the Keyboard*, the Evenings on the Roof concert series beginning, as Dorothy Lamb Crawford puts it, as a “‘Mom and Pop’ effort,” still retaining the sense of being underpinned by a fan's enthusiasm even once the concerts reached a wider audience, sometimes as many as 600: for about half the time that Yates ran the concerts – he handed over to Lawrence Morton in 1954, who renamed them the Monday Evening Concerts, under which title they continue to the present day – things operated on a shoestring, with those involved – performers included – working more as a cooperative, often for love and, increasingly, for prestige, rather than for money.⁴ To a degree, the model was clearly Schoenberg's Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen, although the repertoire was broader: the new was central, but older musics would often sit alongside, in line with the essentially evolutionary model of music Yates promoted. These attitudes, accompanied by an evangelical passion for music which was on the margins, at least so far as Los Angeles was concerned – from Schoenberg, Bartók, and Ives in the early days of Evenings on the Roof, through to those he saw in the tradition of Ives: Lou Harrison, Harry Partch, and Cage – pervade Yates's thinking, although with a tendency to become less convinced that a composer needed his support once the public had begun to see things his way. His way was, too, often a bullish one, though not

³ Where matter in this Introduction is quoted from letters or essays provided in the main body of the volume, no additional reference is given.

⁴ See Dorothy Lamb Crawford, ‘Peter Yates and the Performance of Schoenberg Chamber Music at “Evenings on the Roof”,’ *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1989), 175–77.

without a wit that poked fun at his own pugnacious spirit in the same breath as picking the fight, perhaps best seen in the title of his occasional ‘Chauvinism Hour’ show, broadcast on KPFK in Los Angeles, which featured the music of American composers.

A long-standing public employee, a pipe smoker, and a Roman Catholic, he was also a secret novelist and, later, a published poet; Toronto-born, though to American parents, he was nonetheless a Dodgers fan. He would finally, to his surprise as much as anyone else’s, be appointed Chairman of the Music Department at the State University College at Buffalo in upstate New York. In the midst of all this activity he authored a second book, *Twentieth Century Music: Its Evolution from the End of the Harmonic Era into the Present Era of Sound*, derived from and developing many of the columns he had written for *Arts & Architecture* over the previous several decades: the first half of the volume was, as Yates conceived of it, retrospective, with the second, then, prospective, making claims about what Yates believed would, in the fullness of time, prove to have been the more significant evolutionary events. This meant, more or less, tracing a speculative aesthetic history of American experimentalism: from Ives to Cage and beyond. European composers were, by necessity, on the margins of what certainly seemed, at the time, an enormously eccentric history. Unlike *An Amateur at the Keyboard*, which received a warm critical reception, reviews of *Twentieth Century Music* complained of Yates’s “confusing manner of presentation, his ornate circumlocutions and the lack of any real historical substance,”⁵ his “digressive manner,”⁶ or that the book had a “rambling discussion of the history of intonation running through it like a leitmotiv gone haywire.”⁷ The complaints have some merit: part of Yates’s plan for the volume seems to have been to hold together the strands of his ‘Composite Lecture,’ which, as its title implies, involved the simultaneous presentation of multiple lectures on different, if related, themes, a riff, as Yates acknowledged, on Cage’s ‘Where Are We Going? And What Are We Doing?’ The volume is finally too conventional in form to sustain the attempt and, in truth, Yates’s insistence on intertwining a narrative about the history of tuning, derived from and doubtless in part in tribute to the work of his close friend Wesley Kuhnle, who had died in 1962, often jars. Nevertheless, by 1984 critical opinion had shifted

⁵ R. T. B., ‘Review,’ *Music & Letters*, vol. 49, no. 4 (October 1968), 392.

⁶ Stephen Plaistow, ‘Views of the Modern Scene,’ *The Musical Times*, vol. 109, no. 1507 (September 1968), 813.

⁷ David Stock, ‘Review,’ *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Autumn–Winter 1969), 141.

in Yates's favor, with J. Peter Burkholder, for instance, terming *Twentieth Century Music* "one of the freshest looks at modern music," a judgment which, while not removing entirely the sense that Yates's approach is idiomatic, regards that as a virtue.⁸ Moreover, with the distance of more than half a century, Yates's implicit claim that American composers were often – if not necessarily always – ahead of the curve (and of their European contemporaries) in terms of musical innovation seems much more plausible than it did at the time, when Pierre Boulez had long been regarded as a significant part of the musical establishment, while Cage had still not sloughed off accusations of charlatanry. Yates was doubtless foolish in not insisting on – or allowing himself to be persuaded away from – his own preferred subtitle since the text is certainly not, and was surely never meant to be, a comprehensive summary of the twentieth century in music, but rather a personal vision of the ideas in music which arose in the period and which seemed, to Yates, to matter most. As Yates described his approach to Cage on January 5, 1966: "I have deliberately avoided the all-encompassing because such a book should deal only with one's immediate knowledge [. . .]. So I have added to the title, A Personal Survey. The purpose is to help others grasp what is being done, not to accumulate facts."

Regardless of anybody else's critical assessment, "I am of the opinion you are the One in America who writes about music," Cage wrote to Yates on May 19, 1959, a remark which immediately followed mention of Heinz-Klaus Metzger, the West German critic and musicologist who, a 'fighting man' like Yates, was as vocal a supporter of Cage in Europe as Yates was in North America. That this was no fleeting thought was emphasized less than a year later, on March 21, 1960, when Cage wrote to Yates about his plans for a Center for Experimental Music at Wesleyan which, on the model of Darmstadt, would have associated with it a publication: surely first and foremost in mind of his columns for *Arts & Architecture*, Cage wanted Yates to be involved, the combination of a sort of trade publication like *Die Reihe* or the *Darmstädter Beiträge* with a permanent institution for the support of experimental music in Cage's brief outline suggestive that, at this stage, he imagined Yates precisely in the mold of a Metzger or even an Adorno, this latter less implausible than that it might seem now, since Yates had only that same month dubbed Cage a philosopher of esthetic instances, a remark I return to below, in the process linking him to Wittgenstein, a thinker with whom, Cage suggests in the same letter of March 21, he was previously unacquainted.

⁸ J. Peter Burkholder, 'Brahms and Twentieth-Century Classical Music,' *19th-Century Music*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Summer 1984), 83, n. 8.

Michael Hicks argues that Cage's approbation was meant ironically – the capitalized 'One' written with Cage's tongue firmly in his cheek – but the juxtaposition of the remark with Cage's favorable view of a European critic, his desire to be professionally involved with Yates, and the broader sweep of the correspondence suggests that, on the contrary, Cage not only meant it, at least at the time, but also rather more took place in and through the letters the two exchanged than this.⁹ Cage underlined his general opinion in a further letter, on July 30, 1962 – written, admittedly, to help Yates in grant applications for funding to enable him to leave his role within the California Department of Employment and work on music full time – wherein Cage described Yates as “one of the few writing regularly about music during the last quarter-century in the United States who ‘has something to say’ and from whom selfish motives are absent.” In one of the many reversals of position which seems to take place in the correspondence, in its very latest stages, it is Yates who can be seen attempting to inveigle Cage into an academic position, though the venture is no more successful than the earlier one, if for quite different reasons.

One such reversal can be seen almost at the very opening of the correspondence, in the second letter Cage sent to Yates, though it is one which is revealing regarding one important aspect of Yates's writing, which is to say his practice of sending drafts of essays to their subjects in advance of publication. Typically, subjects seem to have replied to Yates to correct errors of fact or to suggest other minor emendations to what Yates himself admitted to Gordon Mumma, in a letter of May 27, 1965, sometimes had to be a text which interwove what Yates knew to be the case with what he guessed and what he suspected. This, Yates said, “is how I get educated.” Having written what was presumably an essay on percussion music, with a particular focus on Cage, Yates had evidently sent his draft text to Cage, but had surely not expected Cage both to suggest that the essay had gone so far awry that it would be better to write another and to provide Yates with the text of what was, more or less, that article: though Yates seems to have offered Cage the opportunity of publishing the article under his own name, Cage was evidently convinced by his own assertion that “I know that I'm not a writer,” as he wrote to Yates on January 13, 1941, and Cage's text, ‘Organized Sound,’ appeared under Yates's name, the essay acting as a sort of extended gloss on Cage's near-contemporaneous ‘The Future of Music: Credo,’ but here with a genealogy for Cage's exploration of the organization of sound through first percussion, then technology: Russolo, Varèse,

⁹ Michael Hicks, ‘Historians’ Corner: John Cage's Letter to Peter Yates, December 24, 1940,’ *American Music*, vol. 25, no. 4 (Winter 2007), 507.

Stravinsky, Milhaud, Antheil, Ernst Toch, Nikolai Lopatnikoff, Bartók, Carlos Chávez, Hindemith, and William Russell comprise Cage's pantheon here, though he stresses that he reached them almost unexpectedly, through an antagonism toward Schoenberg's disdain for percussion music. Twenty or more years later, Yates's practice appears to have remained essentially consistent: a letter from Cage to Yates from the Fall of 1963 provides a set of corrections for his essay, 'Merce Cunningham Restores the Dance to Dance.'

More provocatively, and in another sort of reversal, of more potent kind, about a year earlier, on September 20, 1962, Cage had written to Yates that he "hesitate[d] to lecture you on 'the errors in yr. articles.' I am rather grateful to you for any you have made since they introduce new thoughts into the whole context giving it a more life-like shape." Cage reiterated this thought in fuller form on New Year's Day 1966, where, in response to a draft of *Twentieth Century Music*, Cage wrote that "as usual yr. work is often instructive and helpful, I mean in relation to what I'm not yet doing." Like the statement Hicks takes to be ironic, it seems to me there is, on the contrary, reason to take this claim at face value, that for Cage Yates's work introduces new ideas which describe, in particular ways, what Cage is, as he says, "not yet doing."

There are many points in the correspondence where one finds such encounters, perhaps most potently in Yates's introduction of Cage to Wittgenstein's thought, presumably initially through his 1959 gloss on "Composing's one thing, performing's another; listening's a third. What can they have to do with one another?": "By Wittgenstein's aphorism, 'The meaning is the use.'"¹⁰ Cage noted to Yates on March 21, 1960, that "[m]any actual 'useful means' in my new Theatre Piece are actually mentioned in Wittgenstein, e.g. the non-rigid rulers."¹¹ Yet, even though Cage pronounces himself in the same letter to be attracted both to Wittgenstein's practical

¹⁰ Peter Yates, 'Introductory Essay,' in John Edmunds and Gordon Boelzner (eds.), *Some Twentieth Century American Composers: A Selective Bibliography*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: New York Public Library, 1959), 20.

¹¹ Cage's personal library seems to suggest that it was also Yates's interest in the *Philosophical Investigations* in particular which brought Cage to Wittgenstein. The two earliest published Wittgenstein texts in Cage's library are both from this time period: *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the Philosophical Investigations* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1958) and the *Philosophical Investigations* themselves, in G. E. M. Anscombe's translation (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1959 [1953]). A letter to John Holzaepfel from March 22, 1988 suggests that, other than these two, *On Certainty*, and *Zettel*, the remainder of the twenty or so Wittgenstein texts in Cage's library may have been bought in preparation for his lectures at Harvard which 'read through' Wittgenstein (in Kuhn (ed.), *Selected Letters of Cage*, 564).

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dimension and to a more poetic one – the vision of philosophy as “a number of sketches of landscapes” made as the thinker traverses, crisscross, fields of thought – it would not be until his late life, and long after Yates’s death, that he would himself explicitly reference Wittgenstein, in the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures he delivered at Harvard between 1988 and 1989.¹² The idea that Cage might conceal or otherwise cover up important influences, arguably including Yates in several significant ways, in part through the systematic deployment of his wholly characteristic approach to name dropping, is sometimes hinted at in the correspondence and, although the idea that Cage carefully rebuilt and reinvented aspects of his own history is commonplace, some of these can be seen as throwing a fresh perspective on his approach, as discussed further below, and perhaps amplifying in particular Brent Reidy’s suggestion that Cage more or less actively “obliterated fragments of his history through misremembrance.”¹³ In this sense, too, the testimony of someone like Yates, whose knowledge of Cage spans a period from the end of the 1930s to the end of the 1960s and beyond takes on a particular significance in the changes that Yates might have observed. Yates himself remarked on at least some of the superficial changes, and some of the continuities, in his regular *Arts & Architecture* column, in May 1962:

Recently, being called on to lecture and write about him, I have described him as I knew him in those earlier years, stiff, soft-spoken, rather humorless, single-minded, coming into the room as if he were a bodhisattva [*sic*] his feet a little off the ground. The mind was like a searchlight, brilliant in its path, indifferent to whatever lay outside its beam. This time he seemed as large as his humor, always and readily at a laugh, his feet solidly on the ground. The mind is still a searchlight; one might better say, a lighthouse beam, sweeping circles of illumination. He has put into effect his belief that one should affirm or say nothing: to this the majority in his audiences responded like a dark landscape to a sweeping light. There were those who stayed in the shadow, who could not respond. And beyond the sweeping, illuminating cone much occurs that does not interest him.

In the same *Arts & Architecture* piece, that of May 1962, Yates re-appropriates the sort of language critical of Cage (and David Tudor) too

¹² See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd edn (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967 [1945]), vii. Cage’s Harvard lectures are printed in *I–VI* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), wherein he mentions Yates’s introduction (3).

¹³ Brent Reidy’s ‘Our Memory of What Happened Is Not What Happened: Cage, Metaphor, and Myth,’ *American Music*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Summer 2010), 212. See also Jann Pasler, ‘Inventing a Tradition: Cage’s “Composition in Retrospect”,’ in Perloff and Junkerman (eds.), *John Cage: Composed in America*, 125–43.

and which insisted that they were best viewed as musical clowns, at best like Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton, but normally without any sense that what Chaplin and Keaton did might be considered art. Yates, apparently struggling to make sense of *Cartridge Music* (1960) hit on an analogy which spoke to him, which is to say the circus:

Do you remember the three rings, the three shows going on at once, the too much of everything that the eye could not take in? Do you remember the clowns? Here before us were the three rings, three speakers, that we could not take in, and at the center, before them, solemnly going about their nonsensical or useless business, the two actors, composer and pianist, had become two clowns. We watched them gravely while they built up their small, precise futilities of actions, and when they ended, when the thing came to nothing, they went on and began again. It wasn't a joke; it wasn't funny in that sense; it was nonsense, release, hilarious.

This reclaiming of the territory of the deadpan comedians goes further, through the specific imagery, than overturning the (particularly European) reception of Cage, in that it also prefigures, some five years ahead of time, precisely Cage's own way of describing simultaneities of action in *Musicircus* (1967) and its derivatives.

The performance was a part of a weekend of Cage-related activities in Los Angeles, part-organized by Yates, which also involved Cage in an unprepared lecture at Immaculate Heart College, where Cage, unusually, seems to have spoken openly and impromptu, rather than delivering a thoroughly prepared – and thus highly controlled – oration. Though Yates misremembered the year, his description of the event, in his essay 'The Question of Stasis' is vivid, and also recollects the fact that it was as a part of the same set of events that Yates introduced Cage to Corita Kent:

The truth is, Cage prefers to "compose" everything he does in public appearance, as he told me when I took him in 1963 to lecture, without preparation, for Sister Magdalen Mary's Art Department at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles, the source of Sister Corita. He talked freely for more than an hour and a half, as lucid and complete an exposition of his ideas as any he has written.

A much more prepared lecture *was* given, alongside the performance of *Cartridge Music*, of Cage's 'Where Are We Going? and What Are We Doing?', just the lecture which Corita Kent quotes in her 'Ten Rules for Students, Teachers, and Life,' but which also contains its own mention of the circus, which was surely what Yates picked up on and amplified:

People always want to know what we're doing and the last thing we want to do is keep it a secret. But one thing at a time. But we used to admire those artists

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of vaudeville who did several at once. To their three, say, we could add our one. But at a circus, three rings, though high up, I remember I could only look at one ring at a time. I kept missing or thinking I was missing something.¹⁴

Yates amplified this yet further in his ‘Composite Lecture,’ which mirrored Cage’s ‘Where Are We Going?’ in that three tapes delivered three of Yates’s existing lectures, while he would, live, deliver a fourth, an identical format to Cage’s lecture, though Yates insisted that he regarded his version as one where Cage’s artistic approach was harnessed for educational ends (and also as an attempt to deal with the increasingly extravagant time scale Yates’s lectures had come to demand). The ‘Composite Lecture’ was delivered on numerous occasions, including on April 7, 1966, at the 92nd Street Y in New York City, as a part of a series of lectures Cage organized, which also involved Nobby Brown, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Marshall McLuhan, and Harold Rosenberg. It seems highly likely that Yates provided his audience with an introduction like the one he provided at Wesleyan University on February 18, 1965:

A COMPOSITE LECTURE is rather like an old-time CIRCUS. [. . .] Don’t try to listen TO what is going on. Relax, listen and give your full attention to the composite you are hearing. If you try, you will STRAIN and go home with a headache. You did not see or hear everything that happened the last time you went to a CIRCUS under the BIG TENT.¹⁵

In this way, Yates reminded Cage of the relationship he had, himself, once proposed between simultaneity and the circus shortly before Cage deployed the idea in the form of an artwork explicitly, having already, arguably, shown Cage in text that that was what he was doing.

Similarly, though it has generally been held that Wendell Berry precipitated Cage’s involvement with Thoreau, introducing him to Thoreau’s 1858 *Journal* in 1967,¹⁶ Yates’s correspondence with Cage provides an important, and very direct, foreshadowing of this. Yates refers to “the New England paragraph [of *Twentieth Century Music*], nailing your origins to this continent with a stake like a sequoia,” in his letter to Cage of December 27, 1966, a paragraph which specifically makes of Cage a “transcendental Puritan. The power that infused Emerson and Thoreau [. . .] reappear[s] in the writing and creative leadership of Cage,” albeit in the context of a welter of other New England figures, including Ives. The

¹⁴ John Cage, ‘Where Are We Going? and What Are We Doing?’ in *idem*, *Silence* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 204–05.

¹⁵ Peter Yates, ‘Composite Lecture,’ unpublished manuscript (1965) [source: PYP].

¹⁶ See, for instance, Peter Jaeger, *John Cage and Buddhist Ecopolitics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 66.

moment in the correspondence is notable precisely because it is a description of Cage which Yates both carefully flags up and was evidently cautious about from the outset, having checked with Gordon Mumma that his reading seemed reasonable to someone else intimately involved with the world of experimental music and with Cage in particular. This necessarily involves Cage in something of a refiguring of his relationship to the tradition, too, since although he would agree with Yates, on December 28, 1959, that “[t]he view of American music stemming from Ives is strong and healthy” he would also signal his wariness of ‘clean’ performances of Ives, on the grounds that “then it’s just referential and to an America which is actually not America now but only New England then.” Though a final copy of the book does not seem to have reached Cage until sometime later in 1967 – and perhaps after his encounter with Berry – Yates had clearly made him aware of what he had written, pointing out before the close of 1966 the specific paragraph which elided Cage with Thoreau and, through Ives, insisted that the relationship was one of significance for an understanding of Cage as part of the American Experimental tradition.

Elsewhere, the discussion seems dominated much more by overt, friendly, and also frank exchange, as in the extended range of correspondence which unpicks Cage’s and Yates’s divergent views as to the question of what experimental composition was and who had undertaken it. Ostensibly the two find themselves assessing which recordings ought to represent experimental music within the American Recordings Project, the category of the project for which Yates and Cage had been allocated joint responsibility, but, not least since the project as a whole foundered before the two got so far as specific recordings – and Cage seems to have been unsure from early on how involved he wanted to be unless he could be guaranteed of fair recompense for his time – the lion’s share of the discussion considers who might be appropriately regarded as an experimental composer and the grounds for inclusion or exclusion.

In ‘Organized Sound,’ Cage had himself described Lopatnikoff as having undertaken ‘experiments’ with records and also stressed that “there’s a lot of deeper meaning in plain experimentation,” defining what he undertook as, finally, “experimental music.” This concluding definition was one Yates let stand, as a cited quotation from Cage, rather than the combination of ghostwriting and paraphrase which makes up the lion’s share of the text. Yates, in turn, described the *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946–48) and the prepared piano for which they were written as “experimental,” in his November 1948 and April 1949 essays for *Arts & Architecture*, but here in the sense that the experiment was a method, but not perhaps yet quite a result. By his letter to Cage of March 23, 1953, Yates was already thinking